DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 456 255 CE 082 235

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TITLE Are TAFE Organisations Learning Organisations? Do They "Walk the Talk"?
PUB DATE 2001-03-00
NOTE 15p.; In: Research to Reality: Putting VET Research To Work. Proceedings of the Australian Vocational Education and Training Research Association (AVETRA) Conference (4th, Adelaide, Australia, March 28-30, 2001); see CE 082 232.
AVAILABLE FROM For full text: http://www.avetra.org.au/PAPERS%202001/COMLEY%20ARANDEZ%20HOLDEN%20KURIATA.pdf.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Education; Adjustment (to Environment); Adult Learning; Comparative Analysis; Definitions; Educational Attitudes; Educational Change; Educational Environment; Educational Needs; Foreign Countries; *Lifelong Learning; Literature Reviews; Needs Assessment; *Organizational Climate; *Organizational Development; Position Papers; Postsecondary Education; Professional Development; Rural Areas; *Staff Development; Teacher Improvement; Technical Institutes; Trend Analysis; Universities; Urban Areas; *Vocational Education; Vocational Education Teachers
IDENTIFIERS *Learning Organizations; *TAFE (Australia)

ABSTRACT

A study examined whether Australia's technical and further education (TAFE) institutes are currently learning organizations or on the road to becoming learning organizations. Data were collected through a literature review and a questionnaire administered to staff at two dual-sector universities, two metropolitan TAFE institutes, and two rural/regional TAFE institutes. Of the 79 respondents, 24.1% were general staff, 65.8% were teaching/teaching support staff, and 10.1% were senior managers. The majority of respondents in all three categories agreed with the following statements: (1) TAFE staff are lifelong learners; (2) TAFE organizations are learning organizations; (3) TAFE divisions of dual-sector universities demonstrate the characteristics of a learning organization more strongly than single-sector TAFE institutes do; and (4) rural/regional TAFE institutes demonstrate the characteristics of a learning organization more strongly than metropolitan TAFE institutes do. The percentages of respondents who believe that their TAFE institute exhibits various characteristics of learning organizations were as follows: provide learning opportunities for staff, 91.0%; have a shared organization vision, 84.8%; are open to change, 79.2%; manifest interunit cooperation, 65.4%; offer team learning opportunities, 71.5%; and develop human capital, 72.4%. It was concluded that, although the respondents considered their organizations to be learning organizations, additional evidence is needed to definitively support that contention. (Contains 10 references.) (MN)

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Are TAFE organisations learning organisations? Do they 'walk the talk'?

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TAFE institutes and teachers are key components of the strategy to grow individuals, organisations, communities and states into learning sites embodying the principles of lifelong learning. However, there is a perception that these institutes and their staff are experiencing self-doubt and confusion about their role in the evolving learning environment. This paper seeks to position TAFE institutes on the basis of responses from TAFE staff within six such organisations with regard to their own development as learning organisations.

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Introduction

> As a 'cradle to grave' process, Lifelong Learning empowers individuals to acquire and confidently apply, all the knowledge, values, skills and understanding that they require throughout their lifetime.
>
> In a similar way, Lifelong Learning can assist communities to build civic participation, caring citizenship and economic resilience, while for organisations Lifelong Learning can foster greater innovation, competitiveness and productivity.
>
> "Lifelong Learning for all" is also required by the Government as a key strategy for ensuring the State's successful participation in the global knowledge economy.
>
> … to create a cohesive, dynamic and inclusive 'State of Learning' [or the learning state]. (Ralph 2000)

Global competition and technology have dramatically changed the workplace. In an effort to create and sustain competitive advantage it is imperative for organisations to focus on learning as a lifelong challenge. TAFE organisations are constantly being challenged by the dynamic environment in which they exist and an essential characteristic required for survival is the capacity to model characteristics of lifelong learning and learning organisations, which will ultimately underpin the development of the learning state. TAFE organisation representatives, most notably the teaching staff, must demonstrate these characteristics.

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This paper adopts the perspective that to create a learning state, various requirements must be implemented through educational organisations and their teaching staff. The paper focuses upon one segment of the education industry - TAFE organisations - and questions whether they are up to the task. Are these organisations staffed by lifelong learners who participate in organisations that are, or are becoming, model learning organisations – do they in fact walk the talk?

Literature review

Organisations are undergoing fundamental shifts in the ways they conduct business (McGill and Slocum 1995). Today's organisations are knowledge-based. They are designed to process ideas, experiences and information. In many industries, the ability to learn and change faster than the competition is the key to survival. The pace of change will continue to accelerate. The learning organisation is a revolutionary way to think about strategy, structure and service. To bring about such a dramatic change in behaviour, every available organisational resource must be focused upon learning.

A learning organisation has a *culture and value set that promotes learning*. A learning culture is one in which there is clear and consistent openness to experience, encouragement of responsible risk taking in pursuit of continuous improvement and willingness to acknowledge failures and learn from them. A learning culture is not captured in a slogan-based mission statement crafted by a consulting firm.

A broad definition of learning facilitates knowledge transfer by encouraging discussion of the development aspects of every possible kind of experience. 'What did you learn?' is a question that encourages sharing, even from failed job assignments, seminars and customer visits. Casting a wide net as to *what* is learning has the further advantage of broadening the issue of *who* is developed.

In a learning organisation, everyone is involved in learning.

Kirnane (1999) proposed that the challenge for organisations is to ensure that they do not suffer from too much data and too little knowledge. The barriers of the industrial era hierarchies need to be replaced by processes that enable systematic knowledge sharing. Organisations need to evolve into units in which there is a free flow of ideas and more use is made of their external information sources.

Fisher and White (2000) have defined organisational learning as being:

> ... a reflective process, played out by members at all levels of the organisation, that involves the collection of information from both the external and internal environments. This information is filtered through a collective sense-making process, which results in shared interpretations that can be used to instigate actions resulting in enduring changes to the organisation's behaviour and theories-in-use.

Organisations are social entities (Fisher and White 2000) in which individuals interrelate and create a 'collective consciousness', and organisational learning is:

> ... emergent from interpersonal and/or behavioural connections and modelled in terms of the organisational connections that constitute a

> learning network rather than as information transfer from one individual to another. (Glynn et al 1994, p 56)

In his 1999 publication, Kearns has argued that VET needs to broaden its scope in 'response to the anticipated changes of the 21st century' (1999, p vii). Lifelong learning needs to be the ruling paradigm. Such an approach is agreed internationally with the focus of a knowledge-based society being dependent upon its human capital, which in other contexts may be referred to as intellectual capital (Ferrier and Whitingham 2000).

Advocating the application of a broad definition, Kearns (1999) argues that lifelong learning is an evolving concept, viewed as both an educational and social practice. The UK Green Paper (1998, in Kearns 1999) argues that:

> We have no choice but to prepare for this new age [Lifelong Learning] in which the key to success will be the continuous education and development of the human mind and imagination.

Such an outcome would require society to be characterised by '... different qualities from those required in the past industrial and service economies' (Kearns 1999, p 1). Such a society would be a 'developed learning society in which everyone should be able, motivated, and actively encouraged to learn throughout life' (Kearns 1999, p 1). VET is required to develop a humanist approach in which people, particularly its people, and their individual development, are the key focus for the way ahead.

Kearns (1999, p 8) concludes that VET as a system '... still exhibits signs and symptoms of a system in transition...' . Moreover:

> [T]he orientation of reform has been towards implementing a training paradigm whose roots, though modified, lie in an industrial society – while the learning aspects of reform have been relatively neglected (1999, p 8).

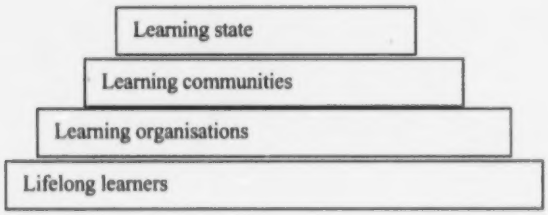
VET can contribute to the development of organisations by becoming a point of convergence for the '... three pillars of a learning society' (Kearns 1999, p 14), formal education and training, the enterprise sector and the community sector. 'The more linkages and connections that can be forged between these sectors, the richer will be the outcomes for stakeholders' (Kearns 1999, p 14). To undertake this role, VET needs to be aware of the role of the workplace in forging and leading change. Furthermore it is in the workplace that a need for continuous learning, employability, competitiveness and the enhancement of human capital are most evident. VET needs to respond by addressing the needs of the workplace, including those of the largest employer group: small business.

To achieve these goals, however, the workplace needs to encourage, support and reward learning. An environment supportive of people and teams, a strategic sense and vision and broad definition of roles foster a learning culture. Kearns (1999) determines that a learning organisation embodies these features.

So the challenge for Australia, individual communities, their constituent organisations and individuals laid out by these writers is that no one part can succeed without demonstrating the characteristics of the next lowest level, similar to

Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The 'hierarchy' referred to here is illustrated by the following diagram - the Hierarchy of the learning state:

Figure 1: Hierarchy of the learning state



This hierarchy emphasises the notion of interconnectedness, or - as some writers may describe the relationship - convergence. It assumes that without lifelong learners, you cannot have a learning organisation. Without learning organisations you cannot have learning communities which must exist for there to be a learning state.

The policy impetus of the education industry, which includes TAFE organisations, is expected to provide the necessary drive to support the evolution of the Learning Society. 'The new TAFE is thus constructed as an organisation with norms, values and modes of conduct that are largely indistinguishable from those of private organisations' (Chappell 1999, p 10). Given this requirement and the rationale underpinning the Hierarchy of the Learning Society, TAFE organisations need to be learning organisations, and as learning organisations, they need to be predominantly populated by lifelong learners.

The question this research activity sought to answer is:

Are TAFE organisations learning organisations?

In answering this question, the following hypotheses were developed:

- TAFE staff are lifelong learners
- TAFE organisations are learning organisations
- TAFE divisions of dual sector universities more strongly demonstrate the characteristics of a learning organisation than do single-sector TAFE institutes
- Rural/regional TAFE institutes more strongly demonstrate the characteristics of a learning organisation than Metropolitan TAFE institutes.

Methodology

The following data collection methods were used to answer the research questions:

Literature review – As part of our methodology, a literature review was undertaken aimed at soliciting various views, frameworks and experience in relation to learning organisations and lifelong learning. From the literature, a theoretical framework was established around which the questionnaire was developed.

Questionnaire – A questionnaire was the primary data collection tool used to identify quantitative data and a limited amount of qualitative information from respondents. The use of ranked evaluative statements and tick-box responses enabled respondents to complete the questionnaire easily and to ensure a consistent response format.

The characteristics of a learning organisation and lifelong learners identified by Kearns (1999) were used as the basis of the questionnaire's construction. These characteristics are shown below.

Kearns' profile (1999, p 29) of the learning organisation includes the:

- provision of learning opportunities for staff
- building of a shared vision
- demonstration of openness to change and adaptability
- adopting of a systems perspective
- valuing and support of team learning
- commitment to the development of human capital.

Kearns (1999, p 13) profiled the lifelong learner as having:

- an inquiring mind and curiosity
- 'helicopter' vision
- a repertoire of learning skills
- a commitment to personal mastery and ongoing development
- interpersonal skills
- information literacy.

Sample

The questionnaires were sent to dual-sector universities (2), metropolitan (2) and rural/regional (2) TAFE institutes. The participating organisations were:

Dual-sector universities:

- Northern Territory University (Darwin, Northern Territory)
- Swinburne University of Technology (Melbourne, Victoria)

Metropolitan TAFE institutes:

- Central Metropolitan College of TAFE (Perth, Western Australia)
- Kangan Batman Institute of TAFE (Melbourne, Victoria)

Rural/regional TAFE institutes:

- Mt Isa Institute of TAFE (Mt Isa, Queensland)
- Sunraysia Institute of TAFE (Mildura, Victoria)

The dual-sector universities provided data from their respective TAFE sectors.

The following sample sought responses from each of the participating organisations:

- the most senior TAFE manager (or another manager from the senior group)*
- five general staff (non-teaching)
- 15 teaching staff (covering a cross section of the organisation's programs).

*Note: this group was treated as non-teaching as its members rarely deliver teaching/programs to students

The ratio of teaching to non-teaching staff sought for the sample may not be representative of the employment patterns within TAFE organisations. For example, in Victorian TAFE institutes '... the general pattern is that most Institutes have approximately 40% of their EFT workforce as non-teachers and 60% as teachers' (PETE 2000, p 48). However, a premise of this paper contends that TAFE teachers will most directly influence students to embrace or ignore the principles of lifelong learning that underpin the development of learning organisations. Therefore, the study sought to determine the responses of teaching staff more so than those of non-teaching staff. The sample sought to receive responses in the ratio of 71% teaching staff to 29% non-teaching.

Questionnaire response

Seventy-nine responses were received from the six participating organisations. The occupational category source of these responses is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Respondents by occupational category

Respondent group	Number	Percentage
General staff	19	24.1%
Teacher/teaching support	52	65.8%
Senior manager	8	10.1%
Total	79	100.0%

Summary of findings

The results to the research questions are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Research question results

Question	Result
Are TAFE staff lifelong learners?	Yes
Are TAFE organisations learning organisations?	Yes
Do TAFE divisions of dual sector universities more strongly demonstrate the characteristics of a learning organisation than do single sector TAFE institutes?	Yes
Do rural/regional TAFE institutes more strongly demonstrate the characteristics of a learning organisation than do metropolitan TAFE institutes?	Yes

Results and comments

Are TAFE organisations learning organisations?

Table 3 presents a summary of responses to questions regarding TAFE institutes as learning organisations.

Table 3: Learning organisation results

Characteristic	Total	Dual sector	Regional/ rural	Metropol' n
Learning opportunities provided for staff	91.0%	100.0%	86.7%	90.0%
Shared organisation vision	84.8%	88.9%	87.1%	80.0%
Openness to change	79.2%	88.2%	83.3%	70.0%
Inter-unit cooperation	65.4%	52.9%	83.3%	53.3%
Team learning opportunities	71.5%	76.5%	80.0%	60.0%

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Development of human capital	72.4%	61.1%	80.0%	71.4%

Sixty-eight (86.1%) of staff in TAFE organisations believe that their organisations are learning organisations. Dual-sector universities (94.4%) rank ahead of rural/regional TAFE institutes (89.2%), that in turn rank ahead of Metropolitan TAFE institutes (80%) as learning organisations. Of the occupational groups, senior managers (50%) were the least supportive of the contention that their organisations were not learning organisations. Conversely, 94.7% of general/administrative staff believed that they worked for a learning organisation, followed by teachers/teaching support staff, of which 88.5% believed that their organisations were learning organisations.

Kearns (1999) identified six characteristics (*italicised* in the discussion below) within the profile of a learning organisation. The questionnaire results for these characteristics confirm that TAFE organisations are learning organisations, although there is some reservation in making this statement.

Ninety-one percent of TAFE organisations *provide their staff with learning opportunities.* All respondents in dual-sector universities have the opportunity to participate in learning activities, 90% of TAFE staff in metropolitan TAFE institutes have a similar opportunity whilst 86.7% of staff in rural/regional TAFE institutes also have access to these opportunities.

Building a shared vision proved problematic for all TAFE organisations, but the result is still particularly high (84.8%). Dual-sector universities again ranked ahead of the other organisations (88.9%), however rural/regional TAFE institutes (87.1%) ranked ahead of larger metropolitan TAFE organisations (80%) in this matter.

As issues that impact upon organisational performance are taken into consideration, TAFE organisations appear to have some difficulty in meeting the criteria supporting their classification as learning organisations.

Openness to change and adaptability is demonstrated but is clearly questioned by many staff. 79.2% of the respondents believed that their organisations were open to change and were adaptable. Again, the dual-sector universities (88.2%) ranked ahead of rural/regional TAFE institutes (83.3%). Quite clearly, however, metropolitan TAFE institutes have some difficulty in demonstrating this characteristic, with only 70% of respondents classifying their organisations as open to change and adaptable.

Kearns (1999) identified adopting a systems perspective as a characteristic of the learning organisation. This characteristic caters for interconnectedness, applied system perspectives, ecological perspectives and the fostering of helicopter vision among staff. We have interpreted this to mean adopting a whole-of-organisation approach and asked the question, 'generally, do *units within the organisation operate cooperatively*?' Whilst our classification of Kearns (1999) may be challenged, the response to the question asked is disconcerting. Rural/regional TAFE institutes (83.3%) are more cooperative between themselves. However only 53.3% of staff in metropolitan TAFE institutes and 52.9% of TAFE staff in dual-sector universities believe that their organisations demonstrate inter-unit cooperation. Quite clearly, this aspect of operational activity (65.4% overall), or lack thereof, in TAFE organisations

challenges the initial hypothesis that TAFE organisations are learning organisations. It may well be contended that individual units within the overall organisation are learning organisations, but the organisation when taken as a whole is not!

Similar results and concerns are identified when the *value and support of team learning* is considered. Team learning is better encouraged in rural/regional TAFE institutes (80%), and is evident in dual-sector universities (76.5%). However, an apparent lack of comparable support for this in metropolitan TAFE institutes (50%) reduces the overall result to 71.5%.

Finally the *commitment to the development of human capital* provides for some interesting results. The overall result for this characteristic was 72.4%. This result is buoyed by the strong performance of rural/regional TAFE institutes (80%), who are perceived as more strongly committed to the development of their staff, ranking well ahead of metropolitan TAFE institutes (71.4%) and dual-sector universities (61.1%). When taken with the result of the provision of learning opportunities (characteristic 1), the outcome for the dual-sector universities appears inconsistent. However, the provision of learning opportunities and a commitment to the development of staff are two very different things.

Firstly an organisation may provide opportunities for staff to learn, but if those opportunities are not relevant, or are contrary to the staff's learning needs, then this may be perceived as a lack of commitment. For example, learning opportunities may be made available in a range of activities such as application software skills, human resource management issues and general learning. But this is quite different to issues pertaining to Training Packages, VET in Schools, workplace delivery and assessment. Yes, learning is available, but it does not match with staff learning needs – resulting in a perceived lack of commitment. Certainly such a conclusion may be justified when taken into account with the support of team learning. In this characteristic, dual-sector universities demonstrate a much weaker result when compared to rural/regional TAFE institutes. It may well be that in team learning situations, TAFE staff in dual sector universities are provided with exposure to the types of learning they need – and the provision of learning in a team or unit context is not aligned to the organisation demonstrating a commitment to the development of its staff.

When compared to single-sector TAFE institutes, dual-sector universities are rated higher by their TAFE staff as being learning organisations (94.4%) than single sector TAFE institutes (80.4%).

The ranking of dual-sector universities as learning organisations (Q. 8) ahead of single-sector TAFE institutes per se is challenged when an analysis is undertaken between the three organisational categories used in this paper. An analysis by demonstrated characteristic produces an interesting outcome. By averaging the ranking of each type of organisation, rural/regional TAFE institutes (1.67) rank ahead of dual-sector universities (1.83), whereas metropolitan TAFE institutes (2.5) are least able to demonstrate the characteristics of a learning organisation. Rural/regional TAFE institutes have staff who believe that their organisations strongly demonstrate a degree of unity (cooperation), team learning and a commitment to the development of their people. In addition, they ranked slightly behind dual sector universities in the sharing of the organisation's vision (87.1% as

against 88.9%). However, a larger sample is required to provide a definitive result for these two types of organisations.

On the other hand, despite the small sample, metropolitan TAFE institutes were quite clearly less able to demonstrate their capacity as learning organisations, achieving a rate of 80% or less for all but one (learning opportunities) of the characteristics.

Are TAFE staff lifelong learners?

All teaching/teaching support staff believed that they were lifelong learners, a particularly positive result given the changing nature of their work and identity as identified by Chappell (1999), and their role in teaching others to become lifelong learners. Surprisingly, one (12.5%) senior manager did not classify him/herself as a lifelong learner, with three (16.7%) general/administrative staff giving the same response. Of the 74 lifelong learners, ten (13.5%) did not believe that their organisations were learning organisations.

The characteristics of a lifelong learner as identified by Kearns (1999) were used as the basis for determining the status of the outcome. (Note: there was an additional inquiry to determine personal capacity to change, and interpersonal effectiveness was modified to learning from others and sharing of personal knowledge). The percentage of respondents who agreed that they demonstrated each characteristic is shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Lifelong learner results

Characteristic	Total	Dual sector	Regional/ rural	Metropol' n
Inquiring mind	97.4%	94.1%	96.8%	100.0%
Concept of the big picture	96.1%	94.4%	100.0%	96.6%
Commitment to personal development	98.7%	100.0%	100.0%	96.7%
Capacity to change	100%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Learning from other team members	97.5%	88.9%	100.0%	100.0%
Sharing your knowledge with other team members	94.9%	88.9%	100.0%	93.3%
Ability to use modern information technologies	94.9%	88.9%	96.7%	96.7%
Awareness of different types of learning	97.5%	100.0%	96.8%	96.7%

Quite clearly all respondents believed that they demonstrated the characteristics of a lifelong learner. Of interest is the apparent lack of knowledge sharing that takes place within dual-sector universities (88.9%) and metropolitan TAFE institutes (93.3%), however there is little causal information that can expand upon this divergence between the organisational types at this stage of our analysis.

Concerns arise when one lifelong learning characteristic ('knowledge sharing') is linked to the learning organisation characteristic 'inter-unit cooperation'. Of the 74 who believed that they shared their knowledge with others within their team, 23 (31.1%) did not believe the organisation demonstrated the characteristic of inter-unit cooperation. Given that these people are prepared to share their knowledge with others, albeit within their team, it is most likely that they would also be prepared to share their knowledge with others from within the same organisation. This result may indicate that there are other variables that interfere with TAFE organisations' capacities to cooperate internally and effectively share knowledge.

Conclusion

Final conclusions regarding TAFE institutes as learning organisations and TAFE staff as lifelong learners are not appropriate at this stage. Evaluative statements supporting the closed questions within the questionnaire are still being analysed. There are quite clearly some inconsistencies in the results and a broader study of TAFE institutes as learning organisations - and their staff as lifelong learners - is clearly needed.

TAFE staff have indicated that they believe their organisations are learning organisations and that they themselves are lifelong learners. Yet there is evidence to suggest that TAFE staff are not risk takers, and their reluctance is related to a fear of criticism from management. Additional evidence is required to definitively support this statement. However, were it to be true, then the assertion that TAFE institutes are learning organisations and TAFE staff are lifelong learners is certainly open to broader debate.

Future research

The results from this research have generated more questions than they may have answered. The following is a range of issues that have been identified within this survey as requiring further research.

1. Why don't all TAFE senior managers classify their organisations as learning organisations? Whilst it can be inferred that the notion of the learning organisation is part of an evolving culture, and as such it may be accepted that not all organisations have evolved to the same degree, this question needs to be asked. Seven (87.5%) of TAFE senior managers believed that their organisation was a learning organisation. One senior manager believed that his/her organisation was not. Is the degree of evolution the only explanation, or are there other factors that these respondents have identified and their peers have chosen to ignore?

2. Is organisation size a factor in creating a learning organisation? Do smaller organisations and those with fewer campuses create a greater sense of unity and 'community'? The rural/regional TAFE organisations are much smaller than dual sector universities and metropolitan TAFE institutes that participated in this survey. However, these smaller organisations certainly performed much better than their metropolitan TAFE counterparts and, it may be argued, at least as well as the dual-sector universities.

3. In larger organisations, does the unit or team within the structure develop its own character to overcome the difficulties (Lei et al 1999) presented by a 'whole of organisation' approach?

   Alternatively, is the prevailing organisation culture a factor that encourages or discourages the 'evolution' of learning organisations? Dual-sector universities are historically perceived as more open and rigorous in their discussion of management and 'academic' issues. Consequently, their culture encapsulates many of the characteristics pertaining to the learning organisation.

4. Why do regional/rural TAFE institutes demonstrate characteristics that support cooperative behaviour? Again, is size a factor in determining this matter? As an organisation grows in size, a bureaucracy forms and internal politics and alliances create divisions and in some cases a sense of ownership of the intellectual capital, thereby reducing the knowledge sharing capability of the organisation (Lei et al 1999).

5. Is there a conflict between the learning needs of TAFE staff in dual-sector universities and the provision of learning opportunities?

6. Why do dual-sector universities perform better as learning organisations when compared to metropolitan TAFE institutes? Is it a question of TAFE staff in dual-sector universities having access to a broader range of resources (ie universities offering many services to their TAFE staff at a lower cost or no cost while single-sector TAFE institutes buy these services in or pay for them)? Does access to a shared and/or larger infrastructure provide TAFE staff in dual-sector universities with better access to some of the tools of the learning organisation (eg libraries, computer facilities) than are available to staff in single-sector TAFE institutes?

7. Is personal self-image a contributing factor in creating the lifelong learner? Is location a factor in creating a stronger self-image? In large cities, do universities have a higher profile than do TAFE institutes? In rural/regional environments, are TAFE institutes more valued community members than metropolitan TAFE institutes?

8. Is learning in a smaller organisation more visible and does it promote a culture that supports knowledge sharing?

9. Is professional development in a metropolitan environment perceived as individually focused rather than organisation-focused?

10. What impact does job mobility play in promoting an organisational focus?

11. Are TAFE staff risk takers? Are mistakes in TAFE considered learning experiences? Are TAFE staff reluctant to take risks because they are concerned about personal repercussions?

Acknowledgements

The research team would like to acknowledge the cooperation and participation of the following organisations and their staff:

- Central Metropolitan College of TAFE
- Kangan-Batman Institute of TAFE
- Mt Isa Institute of TAFE
- Northern Territory University (TAFE Division)
- Sunraysia Institute of TAFE
- Swinburne University of Technology (TAFE Division)

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